



# Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht Potomac

## USS POTOMAC MINI-HISTORY

BY W. ABERNATHY

### King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Luncheon Cruise – June 9, 1939

King George VI<sup>1</sup> was the first reigning British monarch to visit the United States. It was June 1939, when war in Europe was imminent. Three months earlier, Hitler had seized Czechoslovakia and put Slovakia under German “protection.” Appeasement had failed. Francisco Franco took Madrid at the end of March 1939.

As war with Germany threatened Great Britain, the King’s visit was largely political, aimed at strengthening relationship with the United States in the face of strong American isolationism and weariness of European entanglements that might drag the country into another foreign war.

The King wore his crown because of an American. His older brother, David, had assumed the throne as King Edward VIII when his father, King George V, died on January 20, 1936. David was recognized as a Nazi sympathizer and playboy. David’s father had earlier predicted to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin that “after I am dead the boy will ruin himself within twelve months.” He announced plans to marry a soon-to-be a twice-divorced American socialite, Wallis Simpson. For a twice-divorced woman to become queen was unacceptable to the Church of England and the government, leading to his abdication on Dec. 11, 1936, and succession by his younger brother, Albert (Bertie), who took the crown as George VI.

The royal visit included motorcades in Washington and Manhattan seen by hundreds of thousands, a state dinner climaxed with an eloquent presidential toast and songs by Kate Smith and Marian Anderson and a luncheon cruise on the *USS Potomac*.



It was “bloody hot” on June 9, 1939, when the King and Queen boarded the USS Potomac at the Navy Gun Factory pier in Washington to a 21-gun salute and the welcome of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The King brought on board his own five-gallon container of water from England (you can never be too sure).

It was a short cruise down the ship’s namesake river including luncheon on board to George Washington’s home and tomb at Mount Vernon, Virginia, arriving about noon. The king laid a wreath at George Washington’s tomb which might have been an issue with his great-great-great grandfather, King George III (Mad King George), Washington’s adversary in the Revolutionary War.

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<sup>1</sup>King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were the parents of Queen Elizabeth II, the longest reigning British Monarch who acceded to the throne on Feb. 6, 1952 and died Sept. 8, 2022.



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The Royal visit by the Presidential Yacht to Mount Vernon was only possible because a few months earlier, FDR had arranged for the river to be dredged and marked to afford safe navigational access to the Mount Vernon wharf. Today's navigation dredging projects can take more than 20 years.

The cruise to Mount Vernon was a favorite of the President. His custom whenever passing Washington's tomb, as prescribed by Navy Regulations, was for the crew (those not on station)

to man the rail and as the ship came abreast the tomb, the boatswain would pipe, "Attention" then "Hand salute" then "Carry on" while the Colors were lowered, then raised – total elapsed time, about a minute.

In addition to their Britannic Majesties, the President and Mrs. Roosevelt, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King and aides, the shipboard luncheon was attended by the senior leadership and wives of the United State government, including the Secretaries of State, Treasury, War, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Attorney General, Postmaster General and the Chief of Naval Operations.<sup>2</sup>

Card tables<sup>3</sup> were arranged for luncheon in the Potomac wardroom and fantail where the President and Mrs. Roosevelt were seated with their Britannic Majesties using White House china.

Although the King's schedule was crowded with a series of ceremonial and highly public events, there was time for a few one-on-one private discussions with FDR, the first in the President's study following the White House state dinner. These confidential discussions continued when the royal party concluded their trip with a more relaxed schedule at the Roosevelt compound in Hyde Park.

There the President and Mrs. Roosevelt arranged the much-publicized picnic at Hyde Park's Top Cottage for their Britannic Majesties featuring hot dogs, baked beans, and strawberry shortcake but served on silver dishes. The King chomped down with gusto on his American-style sausage. The baffled Queen resorted to a knife and fork.

In this more relaxed atmosphere, the President and the King, sometime with and without Canadian Prime Minister McKenzie, continued their confidential conversations. One long tête-à-tête at Hyde Park between FDR and King George lasted until 1:30 AM, when the President said, "Young man it's time for you to get to bed."

"He is so easy to get to know and never makes one feel shy, as good a listener as a talker," George VI later wrote about FDR. One probable key factor in their instantaneous rapport was that each had overcome a challenging disability: FDR's polio, and the King's severe speech problems (see movie "The King's Speech"). The King's speech handicap had also served to strengthen his traits as a "good listener."

Shadowing these discussions was the Neutrality Act, which FDR was trying to amend or repeal, to enable America to supply armaments to Britain. FDR told George VI that he still hoped "something could be done to make it less difficult for the USA to help" what he described as the "firm and trusted" Anglo-American alliance. He showed the King a map of his plans for naval patrols and bases. This ocean patrol plan led to the essential U.S. trade of "Destroyers for Bases"<sup>4</sup> and "Lend Lease" that eventually evolved into lifesaving assistance from the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> See attached USS Potomac luncheon guest list from archives Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

<sup>3</sup> See attached table layout plan USS Potomac luncheon from archives Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library



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The King recorded these private conferences with FDR in a memorandum entitled "FDR's ideas in case of war." Back in London he would convey "the essence" of these discussions to the "proper quarters." The actual documents he would keep to himself and carry with him in his red dispatch box wherever he went during the Second World War. He would, however, share Roosevelt's map with officials at the Admiralty and explain "what Roosevelt had in mind."

The King and Queen ended their five-day visit when they boarded the royal train for their return trip to Canada at the Hyde Park Station with the crowd signing "Auld Lang Syne." Less than three months later, Germany invaded Poland. Great Britain and France declared war on Germany starting World War II.

Although His Majesty's time on the USS Potomac was short, the "Floating White House" continued as a venue for implementing both of FDR's promises of support, "Destroyers for Bases" and "Lend Lease."

### **USS Potomac – "Destroyers for Bases"**

- On March 24, 1941, President Roosevelt, while on the USS Potomac in waters off Florida, signed a message to Congress transmitting the text of the agreement for the use and operation of the United States bases in British territory, which had been obtained in exchange for the 50 U.S. destroyers previously transferred to the British government. The message was to leave by plane the following morning to ensure that it would be delivered to Congress on Thursday, March 27.
- During his 1941 Florida fishing trip on the USS Potomac, President Roosevelt used the ship's radio room to send and receive secret dispatches to "former naval person," his alias for British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, concerning the "Destroyers for Bases" British war support program.

### **USS Potomac – "Lend Lease"**

- On March 27, 1941, still on the USS Potomac the President signed H.R. 4050, an Act of Congress appropriating \$7 billion to fund the Lend-Lease act enacted earlier in the month and presented the signatory pen to Harry Hopkins, who had been FDR's personal envoy to orchestrate the U.S.-British wartime alliance. It was a big day for Harry Hopkins. Later, his 7.5-pound mackerel and his 6-pound tuna took honors for the first and second largest catch of the day.

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<sup>4</sup>An agreement between the U.S. and U.K. on Sept 2, 1940, to transfer 50 U.S. Navy destroyers to the Royal Navy in exchange for British possessions.